

News Release



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Summer Safety Alert ...

Economic Downturn Means Fewer Lifeguards on State Beaches

Swelling park attendance and limited funding sources have lifeguards scrambling to shore up defenses at CA State Park beaches, lakes, and reservoirs. "State Park lifeguards are bracing for what could be the most challenging summer in our 52-year service history" said Ken Kramer, president of the California State Lifeguard Association (CSLA), the professional organization that represents more than 500 state park lifeguards. "Our thin-blue-line may get a bit thinner. It seems obvious that attendance to our state parks will continue to increase each year and that aquatic recreation is a major reason why," Kramer said. Statistics released by the California Department of Parks and Recreation show that more than 90 million visitors, a 30% increase from 2000, were drawn to California's 267 state parks in 2001.

However, while park attendance is going up, the economic downturn of the past year is forcing budget reductions at every level of state government. For State Parks, that means reductions throughout the entire State Park System, including reductions in the funding for seasonal lifeguards at State Beaches. Said Bill Berry, the Deputy Director for State Park Operations, "We are looking at a reduction in the number of lifeguards on duty during the coming summer months. It is not something we want to do. It is something we are forced to do because of reduced revenues from a stagnant economy. Our intention here is to alert the public and ask for their help in making this a safe summer at our beaches."

Last year state park lifeguards rescued a record 7,400 people, accounting for about ten percent of all rescues reported throughout the country to the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA) park officials said. Despite these heroic rescue efforts, seventeen lives were lost to drowning accidents.

“Sadly, drowning has been the leading cause of accidental death in our state parks for decades” said Kramer. “What makes drowning accidents so very tragic is that they are one-hundred percent preventable. ZERO is the only acceptable drowning statistic in our profession,” he added.

Key Public Safety Message for a Safe Summer

Park officials are encouraging the public to pay close attention to safety signs as they enter the park or access beaches, to swim directly in front of staffed lifeguard towers, and to contact their local state park lifeguard service to learn where the safest areas to swim will be this summer.

The message to the public is be alert and follow the advice and safety tips of the lifeguards on duty. Lifeguards offer these Top 10 Water Safety Tips:

1. Learn to Swim. It's Fun!
2. Swim Near a Lifeguard. Stay in the guarded section of the beach.
3. Check Water Conditions Before Entering.
4. Never Swim Alone.
5. Float With a Current.
6. Don't Dive Headfirst.
7. Never Swim after Consuming Alcohol / Drugs.
8. Wear a Hat and Sunscreen.
9. When Boating, Always Wear a Personal Flotation Device.
10. Encourage Children to Join a Junior Lifeguard Program.

At the most fundamental level, it is the lifeguard's mission to prevent drowning accidents. Every year American lifeguards perform more than 70,000 open water rescues, according to statistics collected by the United States Lifesaving Association (USLA). Despite these efforts, drowning continues to be the third leading cause of death in the U.S., claiming over 4,000 lives each year. USLA estimates the chance of drowning at an American beach protected by lifeguards is less than one in 18 million.

According to Huntington State Beach lifeguard chief Joe Milligan, several factors are contributing to increased beach attendance including a 50% reduction in park day use fees, warm weather, a growing state population, and a downturn in the economy that keeps Californian's enjoying more affordable recreational activities. Milligan added, “with a serious budget shortfall, every state agency, including state parks, will be implementing cost saving measures. We will be using every appropriate

strategy to ensure that our visitors are as safe as possible while we shoulder our portion of the state's financial burden. But, the public should know that there may be some noticeable service reductions".

Lifeguard supervisors from across the state recently met to brainstorm the best ways to protect lives while trimming budgets Kramer said. "In a professional culture that views every single drowning as preventable, trimming lifeguard service is an emotionally charged issue. We have consulted with lifesaving experts from across the nation and, short of a miracle-funding source; there are no easy answers. With summer approaching our first lifesaving effort will be to continue to educate the public about water safety, then to direct park visitors to areas where lifeguard service will be provided," he added.

State park officials are considering possible long-term cutback strategies including reducing off-season lifeguard staffing, shortening the operating hours or closing some lifeguard towers, eliminating second lifeguards in vehicle patrols, designating specific swim areas, and reducing park and beach hours at some locations

This is not the first time the Department has reduced lifeguard services because of revenue shortages. During the economic downturn of the early 1990's, State parks reduced its workforce by about 10 per cent, requiring some of the same types of reductions in lifeguard services as being implemented this year.

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